

5. Does Belarusian identity exist? If it does, how to characterize it? What is a Belarusian identity? What does it mean to be a Belarusian?

Volha Abramava

With jingoistic slogans put aside, being a Belarusian means feeling that you belong to this land. Being a Belarusian means longing for home after spending three days in whatever wonderful country. Being a Belarusian means having Belarus inside you and feeling that it is yours with all its faults and problems. Being a Belarusian means that there is no place in the world where you can feel better and also worse when something bad happens there.

And nowhere else in the world will you find such beautiful landscapes as in Belarus. It is something what cures your soul when you feel blue. The job of a politician is stressful here. Sometimes it feels like you are struggling to swim in a swamp. Not only relatives and friends cure your soul but also forests, lakes and rivers whatever the weather is doing outside.

They rightly say that landscapes define us as a nation. When I am talking about a nation I do not mean some ethnic group people belong to. Our landscapes make us contemplative and reluctant to act. We are moderate in everything, In general, we are not inclined to take radical and harsh steps.

In my work about Belarusian national character released in Moscow a few years ago, I showed what we can have on the political front and what we cannot. It is impossible to abruptly change an internal political situation without changing the national character. The latter normally takes centuries.

Political changes are not something what a majority of people living here are ready to accept. I made a try to give a philosophical ground for what is possible here and what is not.

Why did Americans consider it necessary to spend energy, money and considerable funds on developing a strategy for bringing democracy to Germany and Japan after World War II? They did not want people there to see democratic change as artificially imposed from outside. They wanted democracy to gradually penetrate into the nations through their 'flesh' and remain there for a long time. So why do they hold Belarus in contempt? Belarus is a unique country. Its political history is probably similar to that of Slovakia only in the region.

In general, the Belarusians are a unique nation. They are many points ahead of almost every European nation in the ability to survive. The Belarusians survive any conditions and can adapt to anything in fact. That is why this contempt for a fairly small European country and unwillingness to accept what we have here is intolerable. European values should be smoothly blended and fused with our national character, if they want us to accept them. There is no absolute democracy. Each country has its own way toward democracy.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

The emergence of [Alyaksandr] Milinkevich as a candidate in the recent presidential election led me to believe that a new identity is rising. He positioned himself as a Belarusian-Polish intellectual. The image of a collective farm manager or a Soviet nomenklatura leader is part of the past.

However, the new image has yet to be sold to the masses. The cultural community, students and intellectuals have accepted it, but not common people.

It takes long to create that image because all work is performed by enthusiasts. The authorities are not involved. A handful of people cannot cope with the task, no matter how noble their goal is. Authorities and the media also promote that image. If we have had at least such situation that

we have had on the time of Shushkevich and Kebich, the task would have been done yet.

They need a program, a system of views and ideals. So far, the new image has failed to take root in the human mentality. Authorities could help, but they cultivate some kind of rude backwardness.

It all seems very shaky. We are always latecomers.

Yauhen Babosau

Belarusian identity is the Belarusian national language. ‘Mother’s tongue’ sounds much better in Belarusian than in Russian. When we say ‘mother’s tongue’* in Russian, it means explicit language. This phrase in Belarusian has a different meaning. One needs to know and love ‘mother’s tongue’ and ‘my native corner, how dear you are to me’. This is what Belarusian is. I call it Belarusianism, Yanka Kupala called it ‘belarushchyna’. Belarusian identity is when one regards himself as ‘belarushchyna’. This originates from Kupala. ‘Who is coming there, who is coming there?’ – this is where it begins. It began 100 years ago. And this question ‘whom shall we call ourselves – Belarusians’ – is Belarusian identity. When we understand ourselves as Belarusians who live in Europe, have our national roots, our national traditions, our customs and rites and whatever else are Belarusian identity. We have Dzyady and Radunitsa. This is important. We have both these holidays! Catholic and Orthodox Easters are equally important in our country.

Remaining ourselves, that’s what Belarusian identity is, I guess. This means ‘mother’s tongue’, our ‘homeland’, our state, our independence, our peculiarity – this is our identity. It is determined by our belonging to these roots and new things added to these roots, with nothing deleted – be it culture, education or any other spheres that involve fewer national features.

Speaking at a conference once, I used the word ‘Belaruskasts’. The medical university’s rector misheard the word and asked me: ‘How can the

* In Russian ‘mother’s tongue’ – matershchina (материнский язык, матерщина) is translated from Russian as foul language.

Belarusian bone** exist?’ He even does not know what Belarusianism is... There are such terms like Polonism or Russianism, why can’t there be Belarusianism? And this is ‘belarushchyna’ like Yanka Kupala once said.

Anzhalika Borys

The Belarusians still need to comprehend their national identity. The notion ‘Belarusians’ includes ethnic Poles who live in Belarus and must take part in shaping a Belarusian identity.

Iryna Buhrova

It is yet to take final shape, of course. I can’t say that Belarusians can be regarded as a nation today, no. Because state identity is very important. And it is not only identity determined by the state border, although we do have problems even in this sphere because of very strong pressure, strong influence from Russia. It is very politically-charged, that’s what causes such problems. The level of state identity depends on whether people accept the system of values and laws established by the state. And we see a divided country even here.

That’s why it’s pretty difficult to define Belarusians’ identity, considering that political identity also plays an important role in the process. And now that we have a split society, a divided country (with the sides adhering to completely opposite values), we have to acknowledge that national identity has yet to be obtained. Our government’s policy, with its certain ideological priorities, symbols, influence by media outlets, creates a strange phenomenon named ‘identity without identity’. It has been described in books: a person identifies himself with certain symbols but does not have a sense of belonging to these symbols. And psychologists who have examined the problem of individual identity say that people who suffered from ‘identity without

** Belaruskasts – literal translation ‘Belarusian nature’. The word sounds like a compound made up of *belaruskaya* (‘Belarusian’) and *kasts* (‘bone’).

identity' tended to have a mental shock after this identity fell apart, with its symbols changing, etc. I guess similar unpleasant processes can happen to peoples as well. There are two major identification factors for Belarusians today: first is keeping distance from other countries and peoples: so much comparative negative information is poured on Belarusians. And they start thinking: who are we? These cultural distances are formed in affinity with some country. Look, as soon as Russia's policy regarding Belarus becomes more aggressive, the Belarusian public immediately leans toward a bigger distance with Russia. This is evidence that Belarusians are not ready for a close union with Russia. And despite official propaganda, they do not feel so much brotherly love. This is mystification! On the contrary, psychologists until Berdyaev wrote that peoples with affinity (linguistic affinity) often need to find a difference between them, find a distance in order to feel more comfortable. They do not embrace one another but rather try to keep distance.

The second factor is economic. Not ethnic or cultural but economic! A nationally, ethnically interesting phenomenon – Belarusians' individual economy – is formed through the economic factor. This deals with the development of some local communities at a certain level, etc. What is connected with ethnos and culture is emerging and reviving through economy. There are very interesting processes in the sphere, but they get little attention from scholars. And on the whole, there are few sociological studies focusing on the subject, there were many more in the past.

In my opinion, the process of identification is still underway. It is more overt than it was in the past, but I still can't say that Belarusian identity exists and what it is.

I don't say that there is no such identity at all, it is forming. There are some economic features accumulating, then the realization of themselves as an ethnos, as a people: 'Why are we such? We are no worse!'

When I worked at European Humanities University, we were often visited by Germans and the French. And we created identification images: what perception one people has of another, what expressions, symbols and key words it uses to describe it. Students had to describe some other

people and then identify themselves. It was Belarusians who had the most negative identity. They described themselves as closed. There were some contradictory words like 'independence' and 'conformity', the inclination to hide the head in the sand like ostrich, etc. There were such key words like 'swampland' and 'guerillas' and something of the kind. On the one hand, I wouldn't say that this is good. There is an image: guerillas hiding in some swampland, etc. It was Belarusians who interpreted themselves like this! That means that people did not see themselves as a people creating something historic, a people that is recognized. It's very important to be recognized. It seems to me that people in this area are starting to want recognition. Recognition not only as a country but as a people that can have a say, can contribute to culture and show itself as independent and adhering to different values in the sphere of social policy.

We now see not only how the government perceives Belarus, not only an image created by official propaganda. We see now certain attempts by certain groups in a certain environment to create another image of Belarus. I'm speaking not only about the [Kastychnitskaya] Square – I'm speaking about different things. For instance, about some interesting, absolutely surprising things in science. People say, yes, we are Belarusians, we have an interesting computer culture, we engage in tourism...You know, tourism now encourages what people wanted to do themselves long ago. This is the kind of local pride: this is what we have in Belarus, these are our lakes! I was surprised when I met people who are doing local history research, saw attempts to create true, mundane patriotism, not a fake one. I can say that Belarusians want to be proud of their land, want it to be seen, heard and recognized in Europe. This is very important for me! That's why one cannot say that only political identification is important in society. I want to say once again: politics is the essence of what is going on in other spheres. If it were not for this multi-year, controversial, difficult formation of the sense of identity, nothing might have happened in politics. And we did see that the elections were very unusual. We saw some very interesting

trends. If someone does not notice them in Belarus, he can miss the most important thing.

People often say in our country: 'Oh, this Europe! It wants to cause harm to Belarus'. This is complete stupidity! When you visit other countries and talk to people much, you feel that they simply want to see people who can speak about themselves and do this in a loud voice. For God's sake, politics is politics, but it is impossible to get fixated on it.

Henadz Buraukin

Belarusian identity seems to exist. Identity is a very delicate matter. It is not easy to define. Who is a Belarusian? Who is a French? What does his/her identity consist of? It includes the awareness of a unique character, history and national pride. Regretfully, the Belarusian masses do not have that sense of identity. Many of their difficulties stem from the poor understanding of the nation's value, of the need to have a national state and national politics, and respect the nation's history and language. This is something that most other European nations have already. The problem is that instead of helping the nation to go through this identity establishment phase smoothly without going to extremes, the current authorities do just the opposite. On the surface the authorities oppose political globalization, but they consistently work in line with global trends toward cosmopolitanism and the elimination of diversity. It is a different matter that their efforts contribute to a regional process, not a European or global one. I mean, above all, the government's orientation to Russia, unparalleled Russification and its lies about history.

History is complicated. Modern educated people should make a sober assessment of historical events. It is true that Aleksandr Suvorov²¹ was a great Russian military commander, but for Belarus he was one of most ter-

²¹ Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov (Russian: Александр Васильевич Суворов; 1729–1800) – Count Suvorov of Rymnik, Prince of Italy (was the fourth and last Russian Generalissimo (not counting Stalin). One of the few great generals in history who never lost a battle, he was famed for his

rible and cruel executioners. Russia may be proud of him and his talent, but the Belarusians should not honor him. Should the Belarusians forgive him for spilling absolutely innocent blood of our ancestors? But the authorities keep on paying him respects, maintain a museum in his honor, and name farms and streets after him. The Russians, if they were wise people, would not be offended by the representation of Suvorov in Belarusian history books as one of the bloodiest executioners to invade our homeland. But if they are unwise, it does not make sense to rewrite or correct our history in order to please them.

The Belarusians have yet to establish their identity and understand what they are. The Belarusian are usually associated with the verse, 'I am a Belarusian man, a master of the wooden plough and scythe' after Yanka Kupala. That time is long gone. Now the Belarusians are masters of much more serious things. It is wrong that we got used during the Soviet time to attribute all our achievements to the country leaders. The Belarusians usually credit the leaders with bringing about economic growth or other good things, thereby making themselves seem small and unimportant. It is people who make everything. They are working hard at factories and in the fields – they are the ones who bring about economic growth. The leader has powers to help them or prevent them from performing better. But the leader alone should not be given credit for economic growth and other benefits. Workers should be given credit in the first place, and then the leader. The Belarusians do not understand it. They are ready to give their work and merits to someone else. We need to teach people respect themselves and their work. As Tvardovsky put it in *Vasily Tyorkin*, 'Give me what I deserve!'

What I especially like in the Belarusian character is that they very sincerely (may be not as quickly responsive as other nationals) sympathize with people in trouble. But I do not like when others abuse their sympathy and kindness. They have had a lot of troubles through that. For instance, the

manual The Science of Victory. He is known for dispersing the Tadeusz Kościuszko anti-Russian uprising in Belarus and Poland in 1794.

Belarusians can tolerate high-ranking officials abusing in public their native language. Can you imagine someone doing the same in Georgia? I am not suggesting that we should immediately kick the abuser's ass, as Georgians would probably do. But we must give a lesson to the abuser.

The Belarusian character lacks resolution, will and dignity above all. The Belarusians have a very kind, I would say, Slavic character. We are part of the Slavic world and we took a lot after the Slavs. Moreover, the Belarusians have retained the best, the purest and the oldest of the Slavic traditions in their language, character, habits and daily life. This is good. The Belarusians have something to be proud of and material for self-exploration. They need to examine and understand themselves first and afterward give what they have found to the world.

The Belarusians have yet to understand that they have a place among the nations, an honorable place, and they must not let anyone else to take that place. Yanka Kupala, who is officially called a prophet but many people are still not aware of his prophecy, said, 'Every Belarusian must realize his well-deserved place among the nations'. And no one should be allowed to take away that place! Of course, Belarusian literature has lost forever Dostoyevsky²² and Belarusian-born Polish author Mickiewicz²³, but we must not give our place to anyone anyway.

Ales Byalyatski

It does exist, in principle, in sub-consciousness, everyday life and traditions. I felt strongly my ethnic identity for the first time in the Army, although I was conscious of my identity at the time. Belarusians made friends with each other. They differed from Russians and Ukrainians, let alone other ethnic groups.

²² Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Russian: Федор Михайлович Достоевский; 1821–1881) – one of the greatest Russian writers.

²³ Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) – one of the best-known Polish poets and writers was born near Navahrada in today's Belarus.

Identity manifests itself in multinational communities where people of the same roots group together. We may not notice it in Belarus, but foreigners see the difference when they come to our country. They see that Belarus is not Russia or Ukraine, and its people are different, as well as culture, customs and traditions.

What makes us different? Probably, these are distinctive national and social traditions that were passed from generation to generation for centuries. Why do you spit over your left shoulder when you see a black cat?²⁴ You never think about it. Or when you shake hands with someone on the doorstep, you are invited in or the host comes out of the house?²⁵ You also do not think about it. There are hundreds and thousands things we do not notice, but others do.

Pavel Daneika

What identity is? In my opinion, the Belarusians existed, they exist and they will exist. There is some Belarusian identity, but the question is how much it is evident for others. There is a need to carry out work to define what being a Belarusian means and render the meaning to others. People cannot be aware of you if you keep silent about yourself. We should tell the world about us. But first and foremost we should understand ourselves. However, people do not want to do that! One of their tasks is to survive, live and be what they are. A ruling elite should attach meanings to this. It should load everyday life with noble goals. People perfectly cope with the task of survival, but the elite however fails to cope with the task of attaching some meaning to the survival.

That is why I believe that we still have some way to go to form groups that will be ready to do this quite hard job. Such job requires from the

²⁴ A black cat is considered a bad omen. Spitting over the left shoulder is believed to break the spell.

²⁵ It is widely believed that those who shake hands across the doorstep will quarrel with each other some day.

elite a big responsibility for the future of the country, and also for things that they say. The process is underway. And it does not depend on what this or that political group wishes, nor on how the authorities act. Their wishes and actions can only regulate the pace but not stop the process. It has kicked off and like some mechanisms, it cannot stop once started. The problem was identified – one should be someone. It is evident that one should be someone!

Andrey Dynko

Belarusian identity consists of different elements. This includes a sense of belonging to the Belarusian community, a sense of Belarus' citizenship. This also includes such cultural components as the Belarusian language and Belarusian culture. These are the common cultural codes that Belarusian citizens share. And of course, people at large identify themselves with that unusual political regime.

Valery Fralou

I guess, this is the most painful topic. Many of us call themselves Belarusians but so far have not gotten a sense of ourselves as a nation. And we don't always understand what Belarusian is, although we usually speak about national features. I may not understand this completely as well...

We usually mean tolerance when speaking about Belarusian. Belarus appears to have a rough history: with Swedes, Germans, Poles and Russians crisscrossing its territory. The Belarusian 'hid in potato plants' and tried to survive during these periods. If we take, say, the Great Patriotic War, we call it the 'guerilla war', etc. But we had nearly as many 'polizei' who collaborated with the Nazis! And this intention to survive under any conditions (as the saying goes, 'one sat on a nail but got used to it') has penetrated our minds, our consciousness so deep... Only God knows when we will quit doing this.

I have recently met my friend Ihar Baslyk. He says, 'Thanks to my friends, I've had a look at what has been written about me and who's done this. I thought some were my friends but they have written such nasty things!' There is a painter in our country, Ales Pushkin. One of his townsmen who has no aspirations to a high office wrote such a nasty complaint about him. This reveals one Belarusian feature – the intention to survive by all means, without caring about anything else. This may be a correct approach but if you are a human, a social being, you should be guided by the God-set principles and not only think about saving your own skin. Unfortunately, there are many such features in the Belarusian character.

I know very many people in the army, the Federal Security Service, the KGB, some of them were my friends in the past, with some I served in the army. Their ability to adapt to new conditions is disgusting. Some now even cross the road to avoid talking to me. I don't believe they think about Belarus, its state system at the moment – they are simply guided by their instinct. 'I'd better hide. If only it were peaceful and quiet. Anything rather than war. I will wait this out in potato plants' – that is what they think.

They lack what was typical of Pavka Korchagin, Prometheus... I do not want everyone to be Prometheuses and Pavka Korchagins, but each Belarusian should have their qualities at least to a certain degree. But they do not, as far as I can see.

I may be speaking about a too high standard. Humans are not meant to struggle for something throughout their lives. They are meant to live, love, raise children, go fishing, play chess, they should have a decent standard of living. But I believe the difference between humans and apes is that the former are the work of God, they possess some spirituality... I think that although many now go to church, they are still far away from the Ten Commandments.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

I think it rather does not exist. The self-identification of the entire community, not a small group of people, as Belarusians has not yet occurred.

There are certainly many explanations for this, but, in my opinion, the main factor is that over the 15 years of the existence of the independent Belarusian state, the nation has not developed along a definite path. At the beginning we replaced the Soviet-era emblem and flag for historically national ones and started to revive the Belarusian language, then we decided that we did not need them. At one moment we were going to join Russia, at another we were not. And this zigzagging appears to have prevented the Belarusians' self-identification. Belarusians do not feel themselves as a self-sufficient nation. They feel that they are to be subordinate to someone else, Russia or Europe.

Syarhey Kalyakin

I think it exists and is getting more conspicuous. To establish identity the nation needs to understand that we are Belarusians living on this territory and having a peculiar culture and history. The Belarusians should establish themselves as a nation living in this country and having specific interests. They are not Europeans, Russians or Lithuanians. The country's history is quite short because it was not independent for the last few centuries. It gained a limited independence in the Soviet Union and full independence in 1991. The nation had only 15 years to establish identity.

More Belarusians want their country remain independent. However, many people still want the country to be part of Russia or the EU. This is a sign of split mentality. It may seem illogical, but on the other hand it is quite logical – Belarus needs both Russia and the EU. Up to 70 percent want the country either to join the EU or merge with Russia, and about 40 percent want both. Therefore, Belarus should be both with Russia and the EU, but remain an independent country.

Kasya Kamotskaya

It seems to me that Belarusian identity is being established. It may not seem so from the outside. But inside, it is being established. The process of self-identification is currently underway.

Nationals of other countries would probably describe what is a Belarusian. But for me it is an unfinished nation.

It has never had a national state. It is impossible to call the Lukashenka-ruled country a national state. It may be described as a socially-oriented or anything, but not a national state. The government pursues anti-national policies. It does its best to prevent identity being established. Any nation must go through this formation period and then move on to the next stage. It may be possible to skip a phase in history, but nation establishment is necessary for our country. The nation should speak its language and promote its culture. Then people would understand what it is to be a Belarusian.

Syarhey Kastsyen

The identity of the Belarusian mentality is determined by the nation's economic pattern, history, traditions, customs, education, culture and nature. To better explain identity, I would recall that this land was invaded dozens of times from the West and from the East, but the Belarusians have retained their language, culture, traditions and the names of villages and towns. In Ukraine and Russia, many towns were renamed after Bolshevik revolution leaders. It was not the case in Belarus. Dzierżyński²⁶ was the only town renamed. But he was born in that area. We did not rename towns and streets. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, all former republics started returning old names to towns, streets and villages, but Belarus did not need to do it. This is what Belarusian mentality is about.

²⁶ Feliks Dzierżyński (1877–1926) was famous as the founder of the Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka. Dzierżyński was born into a Polish noble family, living near Iryanets located in today's central Belarus.

Vyachaslau Kebich

I wish I knew the answer. I know my ancestry to 1755. Can you tell me whose blood flows through you? I do not think so. I would say there are no indigenous Belarusians. We had such a difficult history that it is hard to say who we are. The word 'Belarusian' is more associated with the state than with the race. We cannot establish our genetic roots today. The same in France, in America, in Brazil: there is no notion of the nation. That's why I said 'Belarusian' is a notion more associated with the citizenship than with any external characteristics. We are unable to define our genetic roots today. Fortunately or not – I am not sure what is more correct – not so many countries call their citizens Americans, or French, or Brazilians. The majority use another definitions... Try to tell the Germans that they are not Germans! Or tell the Chinese or the Japanese that they are not Japanese. A Japanese means a representative of the race, not the state. There are 'pure' races – not nations – without mixed blood.

Therefore, it would be better not to raise the issue of Belarusian identity.

Zhanna Litsvina

Belarusian identity has not yet shaped. To be clear, it is rather not explicitly defined than not shaped. The national elite has yet to define it, describe it and make it comprehensible for Belarus. It is really not defined, people do not understand the value of this identity. Two years ago someone said that Belarus is a chess piece that fell off the chessboard. Somewhere under the table. How could it happen? Why did it happen? It is the national elite which must give the answer.

Anatol Lyabedzka

No, identity has not formed yet. Our people (irrespective of what language they speak) have an intuitive awareness of how different they

are from other peoples. However, the government is not doing enough to promote national identity. It has very effective tools like television, radio, newspapers, the Internet, but it does not have a targeted policy with regard to national identity. Authorities represent our history as if it started with the 1994 presidential election. On rare occasions they recall World War II veterans. They do not seem to remember anything else.

This is a big obstacle because many Belarusians understand that they are different and would like to know who they are. Even when we are waiting to cross the border, and a Russian trespasses without waiting, some Russian-speaking Belarusians comment it. They understand: we are not like others.

I think polls reflect how the issue of sovereignty and independence is important for people. Fifteen years ago it was a top issue on the agenda. There were Duma and presidential elections in Russia and this was one of the top three or four priorities. Nobody discusses the issue today. All polls find only four to five percent of respondents who would like Belarus to be a Russian province, provided the wording of the question is clear (as Zhirinovsky put it, 'Belarus is the eighth federal district', I consider this a correct wording, not some gibberish about relationship with Russia).

Although authorities have not promoted national identity, Belarusians came to realize that they are different from other nations. Lukashenka and the authorities are coming to terms with this fact. He even used slogans of his opponents -- 'For Belarus' etc. -- during his 2006 election campaign. This proves that Belarus is a European nation and the Belarusians have national interests. Lukashenka realizes that unification with Russia is impossible not only because he would not have any political prospects, but also because more than 90 percent of the Belarusians want to live in their own country. And it costs! I think it is much through efforts of advocates of European values that the public opinion has changed in favor of independence. One of the European values is national identity and an awareness of national history and culture.

Vasil Lyavonau

Yes, it exists. Above all, 'we are not like them'. The Belarusians seek to live a good life and, thereby, are ready to work well and hard for this if necessary. We are inclined to do intellectual and highly skilled work. We are patient but not unlimitedly so. I flatly reject the recently widely spread opinion that our tolerance has evolved into cowardice. No, we are just practical in our behavior. But our land has not ceased to give life to heroes.

To be a Belarusian means above all to love the Belarusians and Belarus and contribute to the well-being of our country, be proud of being a particle of the nation, respect other nations, not to thump the chest, not to get into self-isolation, and not to oppose ourselves to either the West or the East.

Aleh Manayeu

In my opinion, at the beginning of the 21st century, Belarusian identity, based on the principle of ethnicity, including its fundamental elements such as the common territory, blood, history and culture, is not that inadequate but it does not have clear prospects. Owing to various reasons, this identity has not taken shape in full measure.

Nonetheless, I cannot say that there is no Belarusian identity. I believe that it is in place now but it is of somewhat different nature. For instance, I was born in Russia and am a Russian by nationality but identify myself as a Belarusian. Although from an ethnic viewpoint, I am not a Belarusian at all. In my opinion, Belarusian identity is currently of a social, political and civic nature rather than an ethnic one. An independent state and the rights of its citizens is the basis of this identity. This means that the Belarusians have the right to regard themselves as people who live in Belarus. They consider themselves citizens of Belarus, not Russia, Poland or Guadeloupe. They enjoy certain advantages not only in a pragmatic sense but also in legal, political, economic and cultural respects. They are citizens of their country, are proud of this and ready to uphold this status. This is what it is to be Belarusians. It is

a secondary question whether you were born in a Belarusian village or in the asphalt jungle of a modern city, which language you use in everyday life and whether you prefer draniki to sea-kale. It is not unimportant but secondary.

The formation of national identities on the basis of ethnicity and, consequently, national states in Europe 150 or 200 years ago took place in absolutely different historic conditions. That train has already left the station and we'll never manage to catch it. Never! That is why if we want Belarus to become a fully modern country, it is necessary to strengthen not only its statehood but above all its civic identity.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I am proud to be a Belarusian. However, we have a sick situation: there is a mess in people's heads and there are so many mentality problems. The people are really excellent. I love my homeland selflessly without asking for anything in return. I would describe my country as something lyrical, mystical, green and blue, and tender. The land is like a beautiful and attractive lady whose pride and self-confidence are still a bit overshadowed by her *tuteishasts'i* [nateness]. I know my genealogical tree way back to seventh generation. It includes ancestors persecuted for their role in the 1863 anti-Russian uprising. My grandfather was a Belarusian national movement activist in the 1920s in the region of Hrodna. The Belarusian identity is shaped by events and personalities. It is very important to realize one's place in history.

Anatol Mikhailau

It is very naïve to think that there is an unambiguous and accurate definition of identity. Trying to find the sense of identity is a never-ending process, not a fixed result of someone's reflections. The problem is that the effort to establish our identity is predetermined by our mental state, which leaves to be desired.

Ales Mikhalevich

Certainly, there is national identity because Belarusians feel that they differ from the Russians, Poles, Lithuanians or Ukrainians. They do identify themselves as a different nation. I should acknowledge that the feeling has become stronger over the last decade or last fifteen years. When abroad, I see increasingly fewer common Belarusians, including those who still have some Soviet mentality, rushing toward people speaking Russian as if there were their brothers. Belarusians already feel that they are different. When they meet their compatriots abroad, they really show great joy and happiness – they have met someone close! We do draw a line between ‘them and us’.

When identifying themselves, some people have negative feelings because ‘we are not them’, but some feel positive – there is anyway something what unites us. What unites us? They say that Chernobyl and Lukashenka. It is already enough! In the West, it is mostly Milinkevich around whom Belarusians are united.

Consumer preferences for Belarusian products unite us. We believe that our products are somehow better. We believe that we have some quality mark. Lukashenka said once, ‘Belarusians are the same Russians but with a quality mark’. I am sure that the Belarusians do not think so, but certainly, there is a feeling that we have some quality mark, that we are better.

The state has undoubtedly contributed a lot. The state did much – it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the fact that we have national currency and no ethnicity box in our passports. There are increasingly fewer people in Belarus who identify themselves as Russians. I think that the number of those who consider themselves Russians will drop from the recent 15 to few percent in five years.

There are things that really unite us. Our athletes who win various contests from time to time unite us. We remember Belarusians beating Russians in an important tennis tournament. Everybody saw this as a major victory and as evidence that we are better and that we are independent.

Lukashenka immediately decorated them with government awards. This shows that Lukashenka also sees Belarusians as different from others.

Tatsyana Protska

The Belarusians are distinguished from other nations. These are tolerant people as we used to say. They do not seek to change people they deal with, but accept them as they are and try to adapt themselves to others. People like it. They do not take Belarusians as enemies, but as people who create an opportunity for everyone to be kind.

I can cite an example. My daughter lives in the United States in a locality inhabited by various ethnic groups – Italians, Vietnamese, Americans, Chinese and Irish. But these people group around my daughter. They party or discuss various issues together. This community was formed after a Belarusian came to that area. Belarusians are very kind and hospitable. They do not ask for anything and work hard. For instance, when my husband comes, he builds verandas and small houses for children. People who like to work, do their work well and provide for themselves are respected everywhere in the world. Belarusians behave this way abroad.

But they are different in their home country. There is a contradiction between Belarusians abroad as they are viewed by other people and Belarusians as they are viewed by Belarusians. They are surprisingly envious in their own community, but that feeling disappears when they find themselves in different conditions.

Take for instance their attitude to their history and language. They are proud of their history and language abroad just like nationals of other countries, but not in their home country.

Belarusians never share their worries with other people. They are always doing fine. This helps them to be European people who also do not like to tell public about their woes.

Belarusian Television has exploited this national trait – everything is fine. When foreigners visit Belarusians, the latter do not say that things

are going from bad to worse. No, they are doing fine. When they invite a foreigner for a sit down dinner, they lay the table with caviar and other delicious food they do not normally eat.

The Belarusians behave in politics the same way. On the one hand, the economic situation is quite difficult, while on the other they make an artificial show of prosperity.

They could be the most admired nation in Europe and elsewhere, but for the internal contradictions that make them envious at home. There is a mess at home, but on the surface, they are nice people.

Andrey Sannikau

It is a difficult question, I can only refer to personal experience. I have never considered myself to be a Russian or anyone else. It was natural for me and I was proud to be a Belarusian. In the Soviet Union we even had a passport of a citizen of Belarus. It's surprising for me when some of my acquaintances state in questionnaires that their former citizenship was Soviet. I never write like this, I indicate only Belarus. There is even a formal reason for that: I had a passport of a citizen of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

As for identity, well, identity should be based on culture, history and language in the best-case scenario. I would say, it can be based on language, culture and history. But we don't have this. We've seen all Belarusian characteristics destroyed but so far have not seen their revival. After three or four years of relative liberalization, they are trying to drive Belarusian identity underground, reject it. But this identity does exist. Even those people who advocate closer ties with Russia feel themselves Belarusians. And when asked 'will you become a province?', most would say 'No'.

I believe we will have to go, one way or another, through this nation-state-building process. All European countries have gone through it since the 16th century. Today, Slovakia is in the process of nation building. Belarus and the Belarusians have not gone through it yet.

There is Belarusian identity, it is growing. Paradoxically (or maybe, naturally), the heavy-handed regime has made Belarusian features a symbol of resistance, struggle against the dictatorship. And has somehow identified cultural niches. This artificial art, these pop singers that we can see on TV cannot be named Belarusian acts. Well, they are formally, but this is not a Belarusian phenomenon. We can see the same in Moscow and other ex-Soviet countries. And these pretty strong underground music acts and magazines (Arche and pARTisan) support the Belarusian identity. This is natural that the underground culture is nearly completely Belarusian-speaking. We've seen Russian-speaking bands start playing songs in Belarusian. And this is pretty good, this is natural evolution. There's an interesting alternative. If you want to become a faceless pop act, sing in Russian. If you want to be a true artist, to have your own audience, you must sing in Belarusian.

Artists featured at the Slavyansky Bazar festival have as much Belarusian characteristics as they did in the Soviet Union. This is purely artificial. I haven't seen anything worse than that.

Stanislau Shushkevich

For me the Belarusian identity does exist. Because my father and his father (I don't remember my mother's father, he died early) all were Belarusians who had national consciousness.

An average Belarusian for me is... I knew the rural type of Belarusians who are serious people who do care about their property and household. He is not stingy but cannot afford spending much, because Belarusians have always had to survive under hard conditions. But this person carefully plans everything so that to have enough food to last until the next harvest whatever enemy may come and whatever may happen.

I guess this good feature (one of the most important features that Belarusians have) has made us undemanding people who settle for much less than other Europeans do. When the situation was changing, when the level of technologies, living standards, energy supplies was rising and

new equipment and materials were appearing, we stuck to the policy of 'a cup and a bit of fried fat'. This is this Lukashenka's 'rubbish' that has done so much damage, cutting the lives of people short. Imposing these agrotowns also is damaging. The Belarusian is always a businesslike master of his property when he is independent.

I can say the same about intellectuals: the Belarusian teacher has always been the main authority for me. It seems to me that there are no people more intelligent than he is.

Unfortunately, there have been anti-Belarusian changes in society. But they can be easily reversed and I know very many true Belarusians, intellectuals who have remained Belarusians and have not surrendered to these changes. Our intellectual level has been influenced by Russian literature, music and art, but at the same time Russian explicit words, lies, mismanagement and thefts. Mind that many Belarusians have overcome these features. For instance, a businesslike peasant who manages his farm well has evolved into a highly skilled factory worker. The proportion of top-qualification workers in our country is four times as high as in Russia: they have six percent of such workers and we have more than 20 percent. That is why Belarusians still manage to survive. When one opens the bonnet of his auto in Western countries (like I did), passers-by look surprised as they don't understand how an ordinary driver can do this. And I don't know a single driver in Belarus who does not open the bonnet of his car and cannot do some minor repairs to a Russian-made car.

This thriftiness, good management and hard-working skills are typical Belarusian features.

It was foreign professionals who pioneered scientific research in Russia. In fact, Russian science is western-style. The academy also was created after a western pattern. And they also came to Belarus. And there's nothing bad about this. And the fact that certain works of Belarusian culture were created by ethnic Tartars who settled down here does not upset me at all. On the contrary, I'm happy about this. And I'm also glad that Belarus' ballet developed thanks to the Russian school. We do have this European level.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

Belarus' sense of national identity is barely comparable to that of European nations who have built theirs in centuries-long clashes between sovereignties. Firstly, our identity is only being established in parallel with our statehood and sometimes the process is inexplicit and non-traditional. One should not overestimate the importance of traditional cultural and philosophical factors. For instance, the national soccer or hockey team's win, which has nothing to do with issues of ideology, contributes much more to the formation of national identity and the country's sense of national pride than hundreds of educational lectures and conferences. Secondly, national identity is an issue of how ordinary people feel and whether they are able to survive tough times in their history, a major problem of a would-be nation. The inexplicit, flexible and even vague nature of Belarusian contemporary identity is only the reverse side of a dramatic historical experience.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

No doubt, a Belarusian identity does exist. Its distinctions include the language, culture, mentality and traditions. Therefore, the preservation and support of the Belarusian language should be a priority objective. To be a Belarusian that is to feel, maintain and revive our identity, and work to the benefit of the nation and its citizens.

Andrey Vardamatski

Belarusian identity is being formed at present. Speaking of identity as of now, it is the fast identity-building process that is important, not its state or existence.

I will not talk about the construction of identity in terms of values, but I can judge on the basis of national surveys that we have conducted. Polls show that just four to five percent of Belarusians would like their country to

be part of another country. Such a percentage of Belarusians would like their country to be a Russian province. If this is the case, then identity does exist.

But it is very difficult to describe it. It is easier to tell the difference between the Italians and Scandinavians because differences are great, than between the Belarusians and Russians because their national characters are so close. But we all understand that they are different. The difference is less vivid, not like between slow Scandinavians and expressive Italians. But still there is a difference between Belarusians and Russians at the level of national characters.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

Naturally, it does exist. It's a normal, sound national identity with all elements, including, I stress, the language. No matter what, most of the country's residents call Belarusian their mother tongue, which adds to the list of the nation's basic values.

However, identification of Belarusians with their state remains a problem. The state was not ours for the last few centuries; it repulsed people like an alien and strange force. The Belarusians will associate themselves with the state and become a nation, which means the same in West European languages, only when our country has a transparent democratic government.

Usevalad Yancheuski

The Belarusians are very Soviet people. Our modern history is the most important part of our entire history.

Our nation has a long history but its development was repeatedly curbed.

The nation should have some elite, some brains. How can a head live without a body? The formation of the Belarusian nation began in the Great Duchy of Lithuania but the process was held back as soon as some ruling elite emerged and the area was taken over by Polish rulers and then by Russian ones.

Meanwhile, we had to start with a blank sheet.

The Belarusians were gradually evolving as a nation in Soviet times. The process began in the countryside above all. Intellectuals came from villages. There is nothing bad about that because almost all nations underwent similar developments.

Even today nearly everybody has village roots, which means that people have a peculiar mentality and particular habits.

Lukashenka made a considerable contribution to the development of the nation. Lukashenka was a person, who had identified the nation, draw a line that separated it from others. We can freely say today that Belarus is neither Russia, nor Ukraine, nor Europe.

During Lukashenka's rule, Belarus started developing as an INDEPENDENT AND PECULIAR country.

By the way, the so-called democratic choice was imposed on Belarus in the early 1990s. The country was part of a big region and was forced to accept 'perestroika processes'. But as soon as Belarus was left alone it immediately rejected liberal democracy (it occurred between 1994 and 1996). The country rejected it gradually, showing its self. The current political system is a direct result of Belarus' independence.

As for Belarusian character, I would like to point out that it is wrong to say that there is something bad or good in the character of a nation. It is something that exists. Perhaps, the Belarusians lack dynamism, aggression, energy.

Fear for new things does not do us good. But it also has benefits – we do not make mistakes that many do. However, I think that we fear too much sometimes. Our fear for experiments is too big. It is bad that we are out of tune with the remaining world. Modern world is an experiment; progress is an experiment and a risk, whereas the Belarusians do not like to risk. It is good to some extent. Perhaps, we will overcome our fear some day. Anyway, we are involved in various global processes.

I personally wish we moved faster, experimented more, were pioneers and had less fear for new things. I wish we got rid of the bonds of our traditional habits without losing respect for our past.